Interview with Leone R. (Nonie) Mendenhall

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

LEONE R. “NONIE” MENDENHALL

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on April 19, 1994. I am interviewing Nonie Mendenhall at her home in Washington, DC.

Imagine taking a month to get to post! You went to Turkey in 1946.

MENDENHALL: In October we set out, on the Vulcania, which was an unrestored Italian warship or passenger vessel that had been used for transport. The crew was all south-Italian, the captain was from New York. My parents, of course, expected me to be going. They used to go to Europe all the time. They said that we had to have beautiful long clothes and all that, and a steamer trunk — can you imagine, steamer trunk? We protested but to no avail.

So there we were. We got aboard the ship and we were below the waterline in a cabin with two bunks. We could barely fit ourselves in, let alone a steamer trunk, that had to go down to the hold. In any case that was quite a voyage. It was one of the first ships to end up in India. It took a whole bunch of missionaries, it took Foreign Service people going out to posts where no one had been during the War; a very motley crew we were; priests going to Rome. The salon consisted of about four chairs and one bare bulb. But it

was a wonderful trip — our first trip abroad it was. [sound level is picked up at this point, improving volume of Mendenhall's voice]

It was wonderful. It took us two weeks to get to Alexandria on the Vulcania. I must say, by the time the two weeks ended the bathrooms were in a deplorable state. There were lots of cabins full of smuggled cigarettes.

Q: Destined for India?

MENDENHALL: No, for Naples. (laughter) I don't know how the passengers for India finally got there, what the last end of the journey was, but we had, I think, a day and a half in Naples. The crew would throw plates into the sea and people dived for them — you know, Naples: it was right after the War. There were still sunken warships in the harbor and the poverty was absolutely deplorable. But there again the Neapolitans are so resilient, I mean the life in the city seemed just as full of vigor and excitement, one would never have expected this after all they'd gone through.

But the crew was throwing plates out from the ship's dining room and little kids were diving down to retrieve them, to sell later on. One cigarette was precious, a carton was a treasure if they could get hold of one and sell it in town. Then we went on to Alexandria and that was, to novice travelers, an absolute revelation ... Egypt! We had ten days in Egypt, five of them in Alexandria, at a wonderful hotel on the sea run by Swiss. The contrasts between the very deplorable situation on the Vulcania and this Swiss hotel — you can imagine: Everything smelled of jasmine, and the waiters wore lovely long white robes with red sashes. It was very exciting.

We decided, however, to spend only five days in Alexandria and then go to Cairo. So we boarded a train for Cairo and while Joe was standing in line getting the tickets. We had no money, of course, we were young. Joe was just out of the Army, we had very little money

to travel on. So he asked the chap at the caisse there whether we had to go first class, and a voice behind him said, “Yes indeed, you do.”

Joe turned around and there was a Polish (we found out later) gentleman who had lived about 30 years in Egypt, a textile man, and he said, “If you're traveling with your wife, you must go first class.” Well, they got chatting, Joe got his first class tickets, and when we arrived at the train later on that day, there was our friend with a chauffeur walking two little poodles. The textile merchant invited us immediately into his compartment for tea; in a wonderful old-fashioned Victorian type train to go to Cairo.

We had tea, then whiskey, and talked all the way to Cairo. Then he invited us to Shepherd's Hotel for dinner. We were to stay in a little pension on the island of Gemalek on the Nile, I can't remember its name. He was staying at the Shepherd Hotel and we just put our suitcases in his room and went to dine. Then he took us to the Royal Automobile Club where King Farouk would gamble away millions and millions of what Egyptian money was called in those days — I don't remember.

We went dancing, and by the time we were finished with this gentleman it was about two in the morning and we still hadn't gotten to our pension on the island. There we were, scuttling through the streets of Cairo at night with an Arab-speaking driver, speaking no Arabic ourselves. But he got us there. (laughter) And somebody was awake.

So we had a lovely time in Cairo, and then went back to pick up the tiny Turkish ship called the Aksu [she spells it] and we were immediately greeted by Turkish music in a very nice little cabin and lots of Foreign Service people going to Istanbul and other places. We had a very fine voyage of another ten days through the Aegean. There were still floating mines, so there was still a lookout to watch at night. The first night out in the Mediterranean was terrible. I was deathly seasick, and we had bedbugs. But once they sprayed that took care of it and the rest of the voyage was fine.

We had things like rose petal jam and goat cheese and tea and Turkish music for breakfast; it was delightful, wonderful. You know, for me, any post that is the least bit exotic I love. My least fascinating post was in a place like Switzerland, which is just like home sort of, only less convenient, you know? I just love the really different places and different people.

We arrived in Istanbul at dawn one morning with all the minarets just as they were supposed to be, sort of peeking through the haze and the mist. We went immediately to the Pera Palas Hotel, which had its dining room blown out by a bomb rumored to have been intended to kill von Papen, but nobody had proof or evidence of that. We had a wonderful red-velvet plush room and a marble bathroom, a huge room overlooking the Golden Horn, and the Pera Palas was and still is right next to the American Consulate General.

We stayed there for two or three weeks until we could find housing, which was very difficult in those days, and we had to find a place for $50 a month because that was our housing allowance. I think at that time Joe was getting the grand sum of $3,180 per year. We finally found one of four pre-WWI, pre-fabricated bungalows up along the Bosporus, fairly near Robert College, near Bebek. The houses were set in a garden up above the street, right along the water. There was a coal depot between us and the water, in a little village called Karulesme, which the guidebook called “the ugliest village along the Bosporus.” To me it was wonderful but the guidebook thought it was pretty unattractive.

Anyway there were these four cottages on various levels in what originally was a Greek monastery, and to get from one to the next you went through covered arched stone stairs and each garden had its little stone steps and high wall. We had to wait some time to get our cottage because there was a couple from some Embassy living in it. So temporarily we had the very topmost cottage, which was empty and looked out across to Asia, of course, on the other side of the Bosporus. And it was lovely!

Finally we got in and we tore off all the cabbages on the wallpaper and the linoleum on the floor. When Mrs. MacAfee, the wife of our consul general, saw this shabby little place she said, “Oh Mrs. Mendenhall, you can't possibly live in a place like that.” She was of the old school, and I said, “Yes, we shall, it's going to be fine, you just wait till we get it all fixed up.”

And we did, and it was lovely but it was very tiny and there was no hot running water; a potbellied stove was in the living room for heat. A dear Greek maid whom we'd hired while still in the Pera Palas, had a little two-burner thing and no refrigerator in the little tiny kitchen. But there was a lady who tended goats up on the hill behind the cottages who came in every morning at six to light the wood-burning bathroom fire and to put coal on the little living room fire. The only problem was that a year or so later when our eldest daughter Penny was born, we had no nursery, because there was just living room/dining room/bedroom and a teeny little front porch. We decided we'd see if we couldn't enclose half of it and make it into a nursery for Penny which is what we did. Infinitesimal, big enough for the crib and maybe a chair or something, but it had a lovely apricot tree outside it and tons of garden just crammed full of everything; grapes, cherries, apricots, oranges. I just loved it.

You know, your first post has an allure that you never lose, that you have a nostalgia for, don't you think? (Jewell agrees) We've never lost our love for Turkey. It was a wonderful post, the people were. We did no traveling in those days, we had no car and there were no roads, no gas stations. There was no way of traveling to places when later, during two or three trips back, we rented cars and traveled all over Anatolia and Cappodocia. We had never even heard of Cappodocia when we lived in Istanbul. It's very interesting how different it is now from those days. But the bazaars were wonderful, and there were lots of oil people and British Levantine families, and we made lots of friends among the Armenians and Jews and Turks and Greeks. We had a wonderful mixture of friends, some of whom we still see when we go back. Joe still corresponds with his Armenian secretary

to the Consul General, Mrs. Kazanjian, who loves him dearly — and mind you, this was 1946-49. And, in fact, we took her out to lunch in the bazaars when we were there the last time. We made friends in Istanbul whom we've never lost.

So that was a wonderful post. Kedi, our Greek maid, was a very interesting, very plain-looking woman, who was born in Russia of Greek parents who disappeared during the Revolution searching for food one after another. She and her sister were taken by Greeks and put on a ship for Istanbul [Constantinople], ostensibly to be brought up by Greek families there. Arriving in Istanbul, in the moil and toil of the crowd Katie lost her sister, never could find her. There is an addition to this tale but quickly I'll get to the main points about Katie — and she was taken by a Greek family and until she was 14 lived there.

At about age ten, she realized she was just a slave. They took her out of school, she just had to do housework, so at 14 she left and got herself jobs as housemaid with various people. Finally was employed as cook by the Belgian Consul General's wife, who taught her to cook. She came to us, a marvelous cook, who had [rueful laugh] little scope for her talents because we couldn't afford much more than mackerel for our daily fare! But she became a dear friend, a lovely lady, and we kept up with her for many, many years.

Finally, many years later, probably 25 years later, she found her sister in Salonika. Some years after we left she went back to Greece, eventually married, then found her sister. Isn't that extraordinary? She and our laundress Lass(phon.sp.) who was also Greek, and the packer for the consulate who had his little shop off the garden in the main space where we all lived, used to come to our kitchen in the afternoon and read coffee grounds, telling us what they thought our future was going to be. It was always good, however! (laughter) Thank God, they were right.

Q: You spent, I suppose, much of the time after you settled in taking care of Penny.

MENDENHALL: No, the first year I taught school at the American girls preparatory school for Robert College. It was called American; but it was, in fact, all Turkish children. This little

school, on the hill on the way up to the College, was just beyond the little village where I did all my shopping, which was a Greek village called Arnautkoy,

I used to walk from our house to the school; I had a class of about 25 little Turkish girls aged 10, 11 and 12. I taught there the whole first year. I taught them English. They were very sweet, very enthusiastic, very affectionate. Then when I became pregnant I got a bit queasy and had to stop.

The village of Arnautkoy was very interesting. It was right on the water. It still looks just as it was — still has five or six beautiful old wooden Turkish houses.

Q: Did Mrs. MacAfee raise any objections to your teaching school?

MENDENHALL: No.

Q: That was one of the things that we could do in those days.

MENDENHALL: That's right, it seemed the proper thing to do, to teach school. Oddly enough I didn't get any objection from Mrs. MacAfee although she did say that I had to carry on my functions as the wife of a Vice Consul; that I remember. But she didn't say it harshly at all, she just thought that was really what I was there for, and that if I could fit in other things without any problem, it was fine.

Q: What were your functions as wife of a Vice Consul?

MENDENHALL: To help everybody out! (hearty laughter) But you know something? I don't know what it was, perhaps because of my age, I never felt awkward about this. I never felt I was doing what I didn't want to do. I was fortunate in that respect, I think. I never felt put upon, let's put it that way. And also, I did not have a profession other than teaching, and I think this is one of the main things. I didn't feel I was frustrated.

Q: (laughing) You don't mean it that way.

MENDENHALL: No, I don't, I mean I wasn't a physicist or a... well, of course a doctor can always practice at any post.

Q: Not really. I suppose she can as a volunteer.

MENDENHALL: But you know what I mean, teaching obviously is a profession but teaching is ...

Q: The kind of thing it was possible for us to do.

MENDENHALL: And that we could fit in, often, very easily, anywhere — right. I didn't mean to say that teaching isn't a profession, clearly it is, one of the most vital. No, it was an accepted kind of activity for a Foreign Service wife. Of course, all the strictures put upon us in the brief training we got at the Foreign Service Institute before we went abroad.

Q: You had training in 1946? That would have been with Mrs. Allen, or Miss Cornelia Bassell?

MENDENHALL: I don't remember. We had a series of ambassadors' wives who would come and talk to us. You know, in those days it wasn't a very extensive training course. There were several things that the wives did. You could attend certain lectures that were given to our husbands in the old State building, now the Executive Office Building next to the White House. When Mr. Robertson, for example, talked about the Far East, et cetera, we could occasionally attend those lectures. We weren't invited to all of them. And then we had to go hear all about calling cards and the protocols and that sort of thing from older Foreign Service women. It was nothing very rigorous but you were expected to do it.As I remember we got little typewritten things that we were told as wives we should do, but nothing was said about what we shouldn't do. And it was all very nice, casual, and a little frightening because it sometimes sounded a little like the kind of protocol that most of us weren't used to — even buying calling cards. (laughter) That was kind of an astonishing thing to be doing in that day and age, sort of a Henry James or Edith Wharton

thing. Anyhow, I never felt oppressed, and I never was frightened. I just thought it was all tremendous.

As I say, I was never frustrated because I had a particular special kind of profession that I was not able to carry out. And that, I think, today is one of the big problems, and understandably so. I know that if I had been oh, whatever, an aeronautical engineer, or any kind of profession of that nature, I would have found it very difficult to be married to a Foreign Service Officer; no doubt about it. But I did not have that problem, so my whole approach to the Service was one of complete pleasure and joy. Except for an occasional problem with an occasional Officer's wife, I really had no problems. I'm just lucky that way, so I can't be a good example of somebody who had difficulties that I tried to overcome.

Q: My opinion is that those difficulties to be overcome have been magnified and that there are a lot more people who are ...

MENDENHALL: But I wonder — just of our age, or do you think younger?

Q: Oh, younger from a career point of view. After 1972 there were still personality difficulties and there always will be.

MENDENHALL: That is right, that is true. These are sort of just basic problems that arise in any kind of organization. No, it was only; in fact, when I got to Saigon that when I mentioned to one of the older wives that I wanted to teach at the university, or that I wanted to teach. She immediately bridled and said, “Why? Do you need the money?” which I thought was an extraordinary response.

Q: (after laughter) Goodness! That was in 1960 too [or 1962?]

MENDENHALL:... and I was really quite annoyed about that. However, it didn't bother me because I just went ahead and did what I wanted to do anyway.

Q: Maybe we can skip over Iceland and Switzerland unless there's something ...

MENDENHALL: Let me just briefly say about Iceland that the climate was awful and the people were wonderful. In fact, we're going back to Iceland at the end of this trip. We liked the Icelanders very well. Our only problem there was we had a child who was stillborn, our only dismaying event there. Penny was five, and Joe was exceedingly busy — he was on loan there to the Marshall Plan. He was Economic Officer in Turkey.

Q: Our Point IV must have started while you were

MENDENHALL: Yes, but it was not until Iceland that he was on loan to the program. The Economic Counselor in Ankara, Ed Lawson, asked for Joe. When we left Istanbul we were supposed to go to Manila but Lawson wanted Joe to head the Marshall plan in Iceland. So he finally maneuvered it and we went there. (laughing) Fortunately, we hadn't bought our clothes for Manila.

So we had two years in Iceland. Our next post was Switzerland where we had two more children and I was always pregnant and always cold. That's a terrible way to characterize a beautiful country. But Berne is not an exciting place. It's a beautiful city but the Swiss Germans are very unto themselves and don't like foreigners very much. You don't feel very cozy. We lived out of town because Joe always had to have a garden, and two out of our three summers were chilly. I was not very happy in Switzerland. And also, as I say, it was not a very exotic post.

Then we came back to the States for the first time after nine years and bought a lovely remodeled barn on Sleepy Hollow Road in northern Virginia, a house we kept for some 18 years. We had a four-year assignment there. During this time I was very busy with house, children, and volunteer work of umpteen kinds including starting a French program at the local elementary school, which was held before classes. I worked for Planned Parenthood, and visiting nurse service — the way all of us did in those years.

I was awfully glad, however, to get back overseas. I find it's difficult to jump from Foreign Service to being housewife in the United States with no help and carrying on your diplomatic dinners and so forth and so on. I remember one time when Joe was acting temporarily as Cambodian Desk Officer and Prince Sihanouk came to Washington. He was to give a party at the Embassy, his lovely dancers were to perform, etc. We did not know until the very last minute, although Joe worked on the whole program for this of course, whether we could go. It depended on whether certain very important people could not go so we would slip in. At the very last minute we were in fact at the party, as were the three Dulleses, and the Assistant Secretary for the Far East Walter Robertson. “Everybody” was there; and Sihanouk, and his dancers, and it was just lovely. And the next morning I found myself on my hands and knees washing the bathroom floor, in tears, you know, the real Cinderella complex. We all felt it, it was difficult.

Anyway, off we went to Vietnam, to be there from 1959 to '62. That was the most extraordinary change of everything, you know — arriving at a beautiful villa with four or five lovely people to help you. The children were whisked upstairs and bathed and put to bed, the laundry removed from your suitcases. Oh it was just a different life. And in those days Saigon was a lovely city. Joe was Political Counselor and there were lots of very interesting things happening all the time. I was teaching at the university — American history and civilization, for three years — at the Faculte de Pedagogie, which was funded by AID. The Faculty had two sections, one French and one English, and the young Vietnamese students would go out among the villages and teach English to the children.

And it was then when the young teachers went out into the field that the schoolhouses were burned, and students who left our Faculty of Pedagogie to go into the countryside were killed. The war was slowly beginning in the countryside.

Q: Peace Corps?

MENDENHALL: I think they had IVS, International Volunteers Service. There were Vietnamese students who left our Faculty to go into the countryside who were killed quite often. A lot of my former students are here in the States as immigrants who came over after the war. As you can imagine, those were three very interesting years. We had very good Vietnamese friends, whom we still have, many of whom are here.

Q: Lyndon Johnson came on a tour to the Far East as Vice President, and you had Ladybird and Mme. Nhu.

MENDENHALL:... and Mrs. Stephen Smith, a Kennedy daughter, to the house for tea. That was extremely interesting. I had Mme. Nhu several times. My only real problem — I don't know if this belongs in an interview — came at one point, after the Fritz Noltings arrived. They had been told by President Kennedy to get along at all costs with President Diem. By then many at the Embassy were disaffected — not everybody by any means but quite a few. Mrs. Nolting was a charming lady whom I liked very well.

At a meeting one day, held at Mme. Nhu's request, of all the wives of the Embassy section heads were to ask all of the people in our sections to contribute funds to build a statue to the Truong sisters, who were — what? fourth, fifth, sixth century saviors of Vietnam. By that time in the war, one knew that things were beginning to happen and there were lots of social problems with the soldiers and their families and so forth. I personally happened to think that collecting money for building a statue was the least important thing to do in Vietnam. So, as Mrs. Nolting went around the circle and asked us, I just said no, I couldn't see myself asking my Political section ladies to contribute to this fund. I was “very sorry” — and I was. I said that I, myself, didn't feel that I could either.

That was the first time I really came up against this kind of a problem in the Foreign Service. I had to be honest about it, I had no chance to consult with Joe, I just did what I thought was right. And as the query went around the circle, almost everybody said they would go along. The wife of the head of AID said she would not ask her people but that

she would give her personal check. My Ambassador's wife was very upset with me and we never resumed our former happy relationship. We were really good friends, they had four daughters, we had three, the children were friends. It was a very difficult situation. Later on Joe unfortunately had differences with the Ambassador also because they were on different sides of the Vietnamese problem.

When I went home to lunch that day I was really concerned and I said, “well, I may have just fixed your career” and explained to Joe what had happened. He said, “I'm glad you did what you did, it's just what I would have done.” So that was one of the very few times, in fact the only one I can really think of, where a policy problem entered my life as the wife of a Foreign Service Officer. There was nothing I could do about it. That afternoon I must say in the commissary I was approached by about five of those ladies, all of whom said that they wished they had done the same. I'm not trying to show how marvelous I am, it's just that it's an example of the kind of dilemmas one gets into occasionally.

Q: Well, and also it casts a light on the thinking on the part of the Ambassador's wife, I would say.

MENDENHALL: Well, you see, they were told they had to get along with Diem, so Mme. Nhu, being President Diem's sister, of the family and so forth, Mrs. Nolte felt that she had to.

Q: It isn't as if Mme. Nhu didn't have any money of her own anyway if she wanted a big statue!

MENDENHALL: It was outrageous. It was such an example of their lack of connection with their people, at a juncture where obviously it was so clear to everybody that there were going to be problems; that the only way she could think of carrying on her life was to build statues to ancient ladies — it just seemed so ridiculous.

Q: Was this early or late in your career?

MENDENHALL: It was late, Nolting was the last Ambassador. He was there I think about a year; he was actually there when Johnson came but was not yet functioning. But it was, as you can imagine, fascinating. The Far East is fascinating. Early on we used to go up to Dalat, to a lovely old Vietnamese house that the Ambassador used as his rest spot when he wanted repose. When he wasn't using it he'd let all of us take turns going up there. A whole group of us at once used to go up at Thanksgiving time. It was in the pine forests, rather high, it was cool, and just lovely. Saigon was a fascinating and beautiful city then.

Q: The Tet buildup and all of that came after?

MENDENHALL: Oh yes, much after. We left in '62.

Q: At the end of an era.

MENDENHALL: In fact we were, right. Joe worked on Vietnam for altogether about 14 years, because when he came back to the Department he still worked on Vietnam. Toward the end of our tour of duty we used to hear guns in the distance and we could no longer travel to Bien Hoa, a little town just outside Saigon, and we certainly could not go to Dalat any longer, it was very dangerous to go to those areas.

But we did travel. We took the children to Angkor Wat over their Easter vacation, and we went to Bangkok — that was when we were in Laos, we went to Malaysia from Bangkok. We did some traveling in the Far East. Then we came back to the States in '62 and were there for three years before we went to Laos.

The Lao assignment came rather unexpectedly and for the first time we had to leave a child behind; that was pretty tough. Fortunately, Penny had been going to St. Agnes's in Alexandria, and when we learned we were leaving, it was already August, so what to do about poor Penny — there was no high school in Laos. The headmistress agreed to take

her as a boarder for the senior year, so at least she was in a school she was accustomed to and familiar with.

Q: And friends.

MENDENHALL: But she was very unhappy, very homesick. St. Agnes, although also a boarding school, didn't have many boarding students as yet. Anyway, she could stay there, and we took the other children to Laos. Joe was Economic Counselor and head of the AID program; the Ambassador was Bill Sullivan. We had a beautiful house right on the Mekong. Vientiane is a tiny little — well, to us it was beautiful, particularly to the children. But it's a very nondescript little town.

The Lao are wonderful. Laos has a poetic quality that's extraordinary. We did a lot of traveling, and I did a lot of traveling with my husband because I was interested and there really wasn't much in the way of teaching or volunteer work that could be done in Laos. There wasn't much community activity except in the pagodas, and we couldn't be part of that — whatever social work, faith healing or whatever was done. But then, Joe had an enormous number of people under him, and I had 220 AID wives to worry about. We did a lot of traveling to nondescript little towns.

Q: Two hundred and twenty!

MENDENHALL: Most of the wives, to their disma(but it was the only solution) had to live in a little village called Kilometer Six built just for the AID people. This was not for any nefarious reason. It had to be because there just wasn't enough housing in town and rents had begun to escalate enormously. So that the Lao could never find a place to live. The International Voluntary Service young people who arrived thought this was a terrible thing to do — to isolate the Americans from the people, but there were practical problems involved. Many of these wives had never been abroad before and it was very difficult for

them. Their husbands were road builders, engineers, contractors — a tremendous AID program was going on — so they were often very unaccustomed to ...

Q: A tremendous problem — there was nothing for them to do.

MENDENHALL: Well, the Kilometer Six community worked pretty well. There was a recreation center, a swimming pool and a movie house. In a sense it was run sort of like an Army base. But you see, what they were upset about was that they could not travel a lot.

An experience that Penny, our eldest daughter who came for the summer, and I had was of considerable interest. There was a man called Pop Buell who came from a farm in Iowa. He gave up the farm when he was 55 in order to enter the Peace Corps, then he switched to the International Volunteer Service. Mind you, this is an Indiana [sic] farmer, who went in up into the Montagnard mountains, one series of hilltops across from where the Communists were, to help the mountain people in their agricultural development. He learned the language, lived in a dirt floor little house, and in that particular [region] there was also a small hospital and a small nursing school for the Montagnard wounded fighting the Communists.

Pop Buell asked my husband if he could think of somebody to relieve his nurse and his secretary for a week or so so they could have some recreation and rest. It was pretty difficult living up there. We talked about it, and he suggested Penny and me. So I went up to be sort of mother to the nurses, and Penny went up to be Pop Buell's secretary. There we were, in a tiny little mountain village, with all the Montagnard very close — we could sometimes hear the guns up there. At night Pop Buell wouldn't let us wander around without soldiers taking us to the little dining house. (End of side A)

(Beginning mid-sentence) Pop sent messages down to the Embassy in Vientiane and Penny said to me, “What am I supposed to do about his grammar? So he said to her, “You can change anything you want. If it doesn't sound right, just do it as you think fit.” It was

a very extraordinary experience to be up there. Pop Buell was an extraordinary man, and very well loved by the mountain people.

Joe and I traveled by air in tiny one-engine airplanes. There were no roads and we used to go to villages. We were talking with friends about this just the other day, that one village we went to never had heard of the wheel. There were pocket-handkerchief landing strips. Those places were extraordinary. We used to take as many of the government ministers as we could get because often those people had never been to the countryside. They couldn't afford to go by air, obviously, and AID included them often.

Laos was a most extraordinary experience. There was just never a place like Laos — things that happened there. There were two coups d'etat in Saigon when we were there and there was one in Laos when the children were in Vientiane in school. Joe and I were up-country and returned home immediately. We didn't know what was happening as the army base being bombed was right next to the school. As we were having lunch with a whole bunch of Lao military people, this up-country news came through on the radio.

So we immediately went to the nearest town radioing to the airport to keep any plane there until we got there so that we could get back to Vientiane. Everybody was worried about their children and their families in the situation. It took us about an hour to get to the nearest airport and there was a plane waiting. But the Ambassador said, from Vientiane, that it shouldn't take off because there were a couple of generals who would like to get on the plane with us, and we had to wait for them. We couldn't wait till too late because there were no landing lights in the airport in Vientiane.

Well, finally everybody got aboard, including the general who was being attacked and who was going through the countryside in a jeep being followed by this rebel in his airplane. Can you imagine?!(laughter)There were no seats on this plane because it was used for rice dropping, so we all sat on the floor along the walls — well, there was one for the general. And we finally took off. As we got close to Vientiane, we didn't know whether the

airport there was held by the rebels or by the army, we didn't know whether we should land there or go across the river to Thailand.

Well, finally it was decided that we would land in Vientiane. And I must say, that general was pretty good; he got up — he'd been sleeping the whole time — he got up and stood in the door with his hand on his chest. We didn't know when he opened the door who was going to be on the other side. It turned out to be the army, so everybody was safe.

When I got to the house, (there was a young couple standing there with the children). I said, “How was it, were you frightened? No, teacher told us to get under the desks.” The kids said it was just the way it was for them in Vietnam when they were there! (hearty laughter). They were pretty good. We were pretty worried because that was a worrisome thing.

But some of the trips into these little villages were just fascinating. One time we went to a tiny little village right on the Mekong, it was so beautiful, you can't imagine — it was like a book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It's stupid to say these people were happy in the sense that the “happy savage” was happy, you know. But superficially they seemed so serene. The mothers and babies bathing in the river, and nobody starving. There was enough food, and enough rice, at that time in Laos. People could cultivate their little fields, and they had chickens under their houses. It seemed very bucolic and very beautiful.

But this one time we were with this young chap who worked with AID, who was educated in the States, spoke perfect English of course, and asked me whether I'd like to speak to the ladies in the pagoda. When the ladies in Laos got old they used to cut their hair and stop dyeing it and just become themselves like proper feminist ladies, and then would sit in the pagoda and gossip. They didn't care about attracting men, they were finished having their children, they were just themselves.

I looked at the group sitting in a corner of the pagoda and I thought wouldn't it be fun to talk to them. Of course I couldn't speak Lao although I studied it. But I'm terrible at

tonal languages. So Manorak came and sat next to me and translated for me. We talked about everything — about village life and what they'd like to do. I asked them if they had their choice of traveling, where would they go? They liked to go to Vientiane, the big metropolis Vientiane! A tiny little city, but to them, it was their capital. And what would they like for their children? That was very interesting, because almost all of these old ladies with children and grandchildren who went to school wanted more schools. Interesting because they are very simple people. None of them had been “educated”, but education and schooling to them was the path to betterment.

Then of course one begins to think, educate the children and then there are not enough jobs. What do they do and where do they go. Do they emigrate or do they hang around Vientiane looking for work. The economy was nil, there was nothing there for educated people to do. Everything is so entwined with everything else. It's awful to say you shouldn't educate children but what are you educating them for?

Q: And what are you taking them from, out of their little villages too.

MENDENHALL: Exactly. We see now here, with all the Lao immigrants. Our middle daughter, Priscilla, is married to a Vietnamese whom she met in Laos. He was living in Laos. His family started out in Vietnam at the time of the French. His father was half French, and they had to leave Vietnam for Cambodia and finally ended up in Laos, where he grew up. So he's really Lao by culture. They live here in Washington and Priscilla is very involved with the Lao immigrant community here. And they're having terrible problems, Jewell, I mean really terrible.

The Lao are different from the Vietnamese, they're not entrepreneurs, they don't have that Chinese aspect in their culture that makes the Chinese so vigorous and businesslike. The Lao are much more as we say today “laid back” people. Priscilla and her husband have made a documentary film, still in progress, of the building of the pagoda in northern Virginia for the Lao community. It is now inhabited by five monks. She's also involved with

all the health problems of this community, which are manifold because they know nothing about basic sanitary needs and requirements; there's much hepatitis and so forth in the group.

The name of the film is “Too Much Air to Breathe,” and that's what their abbot said. When the monks came to the United States, all their lovely little closed comfortable secure ways of life, their own little village temples and their own little village, everything, and relationships, have gone. There was no security because there were no fences, there was nothing to enclose them, to keep them in, and that is one of the big problems psychologically for these people. Life in Laos was that way, it was intimate, it was full of contentment of a certain kind. Underdeveloped, of course, from our standpoint.

But, one more story about Laos that I just have to tell you so that I will be sure to get in this indication of the people. They are Buddhist but they're animists also. (The house that we lived in was a new house and land had to be exorcized, to get the evil spirits out). The AID program built a bridge over a tributary of the Mekong and there was great fanfare when it was finished. The previous bridge had been washed away and they'd been using boats of course and it was very turbulent at times. So that was very difficult. People came from Washington and there was a great event.

After the ceremonies the province chief came up to Joe and said, “I'm sorry, Mr. Mendenhall, but we have one more problem that has to be solved.” This in great seriousness. That the people in the area were very disturbed because there was no way that the Pi, [she spells it] the spirits of the river could cross the bridge. And if they couldn't get over the bridge, that bridge would eventually be destroyed just as the previous one was. He suggested, to which Joe agreed, that a little tiny ladder be built going up the side of the bridge and over it and down the other side for the Pi to get over, and that's what we did. I often have wondered if the Appropriations Committee of Congress had ever gotten a request for money for this, whether they would have REALLY had a [ladder for Pi]! (both

break up in laughter)Wouldn't that have been droll? But anyway, this was really important to them. So the little tiny ladder is still on the bridge, I think. And the bridge still exists.

Q: Now, that's something I might have contributed to if (laughing) the Ambassador's wife had taken up a collection.

MENDENHALL: Right! But that was important to the culture of the people. Precisely. And Joe was known as a pretty hard-nosed tightwad, and he did not disagree with this request at all. But this was life in Laos. And then we lost it, of course. And a lot of our Lao friends are here now, as I said.

The pagoda is now finished in northern Virginia, near Manassas. It was built out there only because they couldn't afford to get anything closer. It is inconvenient for everybody, and inconvenient for the people who live out there, who are rather conservative Virginia farmers. Priscilla had to have several training sessions with the sheriff's office in Manassas because the people were protesting this pagoda. Relationships were getting very difficult and it was thought that if the sheriff made his people understand a little better what the Lao were like, then the people wouldn't protest so much.

So Priscilla spent two or three days with the sheriff's office. Now when they have a big festa, the sheriff's deputies go out there and look over the situation to be sure there's no problem. You know the Lao, in their simple way when they have loudspeakers, they do disturb the community when they have a great feast of some kind, religious processions and so on. But I think it's working out pretty well, on the whole.

Then we came back to the United States again, from '69 to about '72. But then we did our Inspection travel. And that was wonderful. I couldn't go always with Joe — he was Inspector for three years — because we couldn't afford it. Iran and other places were too expensive to go to. And also the children were in and out of boarding school and going to

colleges and universities — it was one o“those times.” So part of the time I was with Joe and part of the time I was not.

The first Inspection tour was Italy, which of course was what determined our future retirement life, because I fell hook line and sinker for Italy. It was so beautiful. We always wanted to go to Italy. We always had planned to go after we retired to live there at least a year and see what we wanted to do. But when we inspected from Trieste to Milan to Florence to Rome, for three or four months, you can imagine how exciting that was. I fell in love with Tuscany.

And it was a time when the Vietnam war was going badly and we had been very involved for many years. I just thought I couldn't stand one more minute of this agony we were all going through. To arrive in Tuscany, it was just like sanctuary. It was a world so removed from what we had all in America been living through all these years that I just felt I had to stay there. You understand?

Q: Yes.

MENDENHALL: I often have thought why did I, why did we make this decision — I more than Joe, because (she laughs) he was much more conservative about these things than I — but it was a tremendous decision to make. A good deal of it, I finally realized, was because I was just escaping from a very tragic situation.

Q: Which followed you back to Washington.

MENDENHALL: Oh yes, in fact, because Joe was still very much involved. The children were at university, there were manifestations, their father was involved in Vietnam.

My most exciting Inspections, '70 to '72, were of course Italy and Yugoslavia, which were the most beautiful. During the Inspection period also we decided to buy a piece of land in Tuscany. When Joe went off to places like Iran and I could not go with him, then I

rented the little restored farmhouse of Anne and “Tully” Torbert in Tuscany for a year. Our youngest daughter Anne left Abbott, with Abbot's permission, to take her senior year at the University for Foreign Students in Perugia, and I spent a year on my own building a house in Italy because our land lay just across a little tiny hill from the same village as the Torberts' house.

It was a wonderful year; a very needed year for me, because as I mentioned, the terrible agonies of Vietnam affected everybody and I just had to be removed from everything. And there I was, in a little stone cottage with no electricity and only the fireplaces for heat, and a big library, and classical music on a little radio, and a beautiful view over the Val di Chiana; lovely people in the village — I only spoke French, no Italian. It didn't seem to matter because the Italians are very amenable and very eager to help anybody with their language as long as you show some interest in learning it. When I finally started learning Italian, it was of course very prosaic words like “tiles” and “pipes” and “windows” and so forth. But the workmen were wonderful, and I went every morning to our little excavation. Inch by inch the house grew. It went up from November to June, and the Torberts came back to their summer cottage in June. So I had to leave and go into our house before it had a front door. The only windows and the only door were on the master bedroom, and there I lived for a month while everything was finished. But it was a wonderful year.

Q: Did the children come and go?

MENDENHALL: They came for vacations. Everybody including my parents were there for Christmas, at which point we could walk on the floor of the second story. We spent a mild and lovely Christmas day having a picnic in Cortona up at the fort, We got to know the village people very well and we very quickly became part of Lucignano. It was lovely. They loved our girls, and the girls loved them, and of course being young American girls they attracted young Italian boys in droves, and that's really how we began our acquaintanceship with the village, through the children.

So that was a lovely, a wonderful year in fact. When we arrived in Lucignano we didn't know that there were any other foreigners there but the chap from whom we bought the land introduced us to the Torberts, whom Joe had known o“Tully” in the Foreign Service but had never met him. Then we discovered there was another Foreign Service lady who'd been the Consul in Florence, A... Johanssen [phon.sp.] who had retired there many years before. And there was a marvelous pair of old dames — the only way I can describe them — who lived still outside Lucignano in a teeny little scarcely restored cottage in the woods; they'd lived in Italy for about 55 years. An extraordinary pair — one American, the other born of Chinese and Danish parents. (End of tape.)

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BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Joseph A. Mendenhall

Spouse's Position: Econ/Com, Political, Marshall Plan (AID), Inspector, AEP

Spouse Entered Service: 1946Left Service: 1975You Entered Service: Same

Status:Spouse of retiree

Posts: 1946-49Istanbul, Turkey 1949-51Reykjavik, Iceland 1952-55Bern, Switzerland 1955-59Washington, DC 1959-62Saigon, Vietnam 1962-65Washington, DC 1965-68Vientiane, Laos 1968-69Washington, DC 1970-72FS Inspector, Washington, DC 1973-75Tananarive, Madagascar

Place/Date of birth: New York City, October 2, 1922

Maiden Name: Reiber

Parents: Stepfather a lawyer

Library of Congress

Schools: Vassar, BA: Columbia, MA

Profession: Teacher, Painter

Date/Place of Marriage: New York, March 17, 1946

Children:

Penelope (1946)

Priscilla (1952)

Anne (1954)

Positions held (Please specify Volunteer or Paid):A. At Post: Istanbul - (Paid)Taught at American High School (Robert College); (Paid) Saigon Taught at University (3 years), President, American Wives' Association; Taught at School for Blind; Worked at Go Vap orphanage

End of interview